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Role of Organized Crime 'Open,' Slayings Panel Told by Counsel

By Jeremiah O'Leary
Washington Star Staff Writer

As the House Assassinations Committee wound up public hearings on the John F. Kennedy phase of its investigation, it was told by its committee counsel that the question of organized crime's involvement in the murder of a president was still an open one.

Nothing that has been uncovered excludes it, counsel G. Robert Blakey said yesterday, and much that is new points to it. Blakey said organized crime had the motive, the opportunity and the means to involve itself in the plot to assassinate Kennedy and that the possibility can be neither dismissed nor established.

But in a closing soliloquy, Committee Chairman Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, cautioned the public on what it makes of conspiracy theories, noting that conspiracy is founded on association, but more than association is required to establish a conspiracy. Stokes said the committee may find, as the Warren Commission did but for different reasons, that Kennedy died by the hand of a lone assassin.

The remarks of the committee counsel and its chairman came after the panel heard Mafia leader Santo Trafficante claim he only acted as an interpreter in a meeting with a Cuban exile in which Kennedy's future was mentioned. It then heard an organized crime expert testify he found it incredible that a leading Cosa Nostra figure such as Trafficante would be acting in such a minor role in the contact.

ORGANIZED CRIME expert Ralph Salerno yesterday told the committee it would be naive to accept Trafficante's testimony at face value.

Trafficante testified both about a meeting with exile Jose Aleman and meetings with gangland figures John Roselli and Sam Giancana in the CIA-Cosa Nostra plot to kill Communist Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

Testifying on the 17th and final day of this series of public hearings on the murder of Kennedy in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, Salerno told the panel, "I believe John Roselli got the first approach and would not have worked with the CIA on the Castro plot without the permission of his superior, Sam Giancana. I believe Giancana approved it and then approached his peer, Mr. Trafficante, and asked for his cooperation."

He said Trafficante ranked so high in the Cosa Nostra hierarchy that he never would have served as a mere interpreter between the American and Cuban plotters.

Stokes told the committee that, although the Kennedy public hearings have concluded, except for perhaps one or two yet unscheduled days of additional hearings, all of the evidence is not yet in.

"I RECOGNIZE there have been loose ends in our hearings," Stokes said. "Most of them we hope to be able to tie down in our final report. But life itself contains loose ends."

He said 59 witnesses appeared before the committee on the Kennedy case and well over 500 exhibits were put in the record. Investigators made 385 trips to 564 places and witness interviews totaled more than 1,548.

Stokes said 75 witnesses were questioned in executive session, 41 of whom were immunized. More than 500 files from government agencies were reviewed, including the FBI file on Lee Harvey Oswald which alone consists of 238 volumes.

Salerno, a veteran investigator of organized crime with the New York Police Department and an expert on La Cosa Nostra, said Trafficante earlier in the day did not accurately explain his role in organized crime. There is no way Trafficante would have acted as an interpreter, considering his high rank as Mafia boss for southern Florida, for the Cuban conspirators or his fellow mobsters, Roselli and Giancana.

Salerno explained in great detail the mob's national organization and rank structure, and brought one of the few laughs that came from the otherwise somber proceedings with an illustration of how the Mob functions:

HE SAID GANGLAND leader Carlo Gambino has the cover of being a labor consultant. "Gambino doesn't know the difference between Samuel Gompers and Ringo Starr," Salerno testified. But that is one of the ways the Mafia operates its business on a scale like that of U.S. Steel in narcotics, labor racketeering, prostitution and gambling, he said.

He said that it was possible but unlikely that the late Jack Ruby, who shot Lee Harvey Oswald to death, would have been used by La Cosa Nostra to do anything important for

them, although sometimes underworld "families" do use independent people.

"Jack Ruby would not have made a pimple on the back of an organized crime figure's neck," Salerno testified. "But my professional opinion is that there is no evidence that the national commission of the Cosa Nostra directed or approved the assassination of President Kennedy."

It is always possible, he conceded, that some leaders might have ordered Kennedy's death, and presented numerous transcripts of wiretapped Mob conversations indicating that Cosa Nostra figures wanted Kennedy dead because of the trouble the Kennedy brothers were making for the organization in 1963.

TO THIS DAY, he said, authorities do not know why Roselli and Giancana were murdered, but it may have been because of their contact with the CIA or some internal matter.

The frail, 63-year-old Trafficante, with immunity from prosecution furnished on an order from federal Judge Oliver Gasch, would most likely never have dealt personally with any decision to violently eliminate Castro or anybody else.

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Reputed Godfather Tells About Plot To Murder Castro

By George Lardner Jr.

Washington Post Staff Writer

Casually tossing his dark blue hat on the floor beside him, reputed Mafia don Santo Trafficante told the House Assassinations Committee yesterday of taking part in a plot to kill Cuban President Fidel Castro, but insisted that his role had been greatly exaggerated.

"I thought I was helping the United States government," Trafficante said. He swore that his "total involvement was to be an interpreter," and said he never took a penny for his efforts.

Testifying under a court-ordered grant of immunity that kept him from invoking the Fifth Amendment, Trafficante strenuously denied ever predicting that President Kennedy would one day be "hit," and disclaimed any advance knowledge of that assassination.

"Absolutely not," he said. "No way." Plainly skeptical as its public hearings on the Kennedy assassination drew to an inconclusive finale, the committee poured into the public record a sheaf of FBI electronic surveillance records showing that underworld leaders often voiced hopes that Kennedy and his brother, Robert, would be killed. But committee members and lawyers acknowledged that there were still too many loose ends for any firm findings.

Chairman Louis Stokes (D-Ohio) said he hoped to tie down most of those loose ends in the committee's final report at the end of the year, but he conceded that this may not be possible.

"Frankly, life itself contains loose ends," Stokes said. "Not every question that can be asked can be answered."

A prominent Cuban exile, Jose Aleman, told the committee Wednesday that Trafficante had once predicted to him that Kennedy would never be reelected because he was going to be "hit." Aleman charged that the underworld had by then actually entered into a secret alliance with the Castro regime, and implied that this may have led to the president's death.

Trafficante replied, in effect, that he never had much to do with Castro beyond joining in the abortive CIA-sponsored scheme to kill him.

"There is no affiliation whatsoever between the Castro government and myself," the grandfatherly looking underworld figure said. "Never has been."

He also denied ever entertaining any real hopes of reestablishing his operations in Cuba, where he had once been the alleged overlord of syndicate gambling. Trafficante fled from Cuba on a pretext in 1960, after Castro had closed down the casinos in Havana, but he shurgged off the episode as one of life's little setbacks.

"Most of the money I had there was Cuban money," he said. "I was young. I had a good time. I checked it off to experience."

Now 63 and suffering from chronic hypertensive vascular disease, among other ailments, Trafficante said he was first contacted about the CIA assassination plot in late 1960 or early 1961 by John Roselli, a close associate of Chicago underworld boss Sam (Momo) Giancana, at the Fontainbleu Hotel in Miami Beach.

"Seeing the United States government wanted it done," he said he reasoned, "I go along with it... I figured it was like a war." He said Giancana entered the scheme shortly thereafter.

According to a CIA inspector general's report in 1967, it was Trafficante who procured the services of a Cuban exile leader and a Castro government official "as two persons who could serve as 'potential assassins,'" and it was Trafficante who received poison pellets to be used in the attempt and then passed them on to the Cuban contacts.

Trafficante denied such vigorous participation, and maintained that the Cubans, identified at the hearing only as Mr. X and Mr. Y, had actually been enlisted by Raphael (Macho) Gener, an antiCastro activist whom Roselli had asked about.

"He asked me what kind of man he [Gener] was," Trafficante testified. "I said he was a good man, at least he was antiCastro."

"The pills were supposed to be administered by Mr. X," Trafficante said, but he said, "I did not give any pills to X. I did not give any money to X. I did not receive no pills from Roselli." Instead, he said that "after a couple of meetings, they told me they didn't need my services anymore. When they told me that, I just backed off."

Trafficante said he would like to have gone back to Havana in the event of Castro's downfall and the return of legalized gambling, but he said that talk of his wanting "gambling monopolies and all that trash about dope and prostitution, that's not true."

The reputed underworld leader, who gave his occupation as "retired," without saying from what, told the committee he did have discussions with exile Aleman about a Teamsters union loan that Aleman hoped to get. Trafficante said he may also have told Aleman on one occasion that "Kennedy was not going to get reelected, [but] not that he was going to get hit."

"I was speaking to him in Spanish," Trafficante protested. "In Spanish, there was no way I could have told him Kennedy was going to get 'hit'... That's not right. That's not true. That's all I can say."

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Reputed Mafia leader Santo Trafficante said he participated in a CIA plot to kill Fidel Castro but knew of no Cuban attempt to retaliate. Testifying with immunity before a House panel, Trafficante also denied he told an FBI informer that President Kennedy would be "hit" five months before Kennedy's assassination.

Bob Wiedrich

Critics with 20/20 hindsight

PEOPLE ARE scolding former Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard Helms for having failed to spill his guts to the Warren Commission about government plots to get rid of Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.

But they are conveniently overlooking the fact that a host of higher-ups in the American government also were aware of the effort to assassinate a foreign chief of state.

And that at the time they think Helms should have told all to the Warren Commission, John F. Kennedy's own brother, Robert, then attorney general of the United States, knew all about the anti-Castro plots, too.

So why do they now think that Helms, while he served as deputy CIA chief in charge of clandestine operations, should have taken it upon himself to tell the secrets when they were known by people in far loftier positions?

EVEN HELMS offered that in his defense when he told a House Committee last week that he wasn't prepared to accept the sole blame for having kept the Warren Commission in the dark:

Helms testified that Bobby Kennedy was aware of the anti-Castro schemes at the time the Warren Commission was investigating his brother's assassination in 1963.

So was former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, the National Security Council, and others working closely with then-President Lyndon B. Johnson.

And, if Helms knew the information in his role as deputy CIA chief, so did John A. McCone, who headed the agency from the time Kennedy appointed him in 1962 until he was succeeded by retired Adm. William F. Raborn under Johnson in 1965.

Helms didn't become CIA chief himself until Johnson gave him the job in 1966. Until then, he was a subordinate. But a year later, Helms testified, he personally informed Johnson about all the anti-Castro plots.

LOOKING BACK, it is not unreasonable to assume that Johnson already knew about the plots to waste Castro from McCone, who reported directly to the Oval Office under both Kennedy and Johnson.

It also is not unreasonable to assume that McCone told both his bosses what was going on on an informal basis.

Nevertheless, Helms walked right into the arms of his critics when he expressed regret to the House panel that he hadn't given the Warren Commission an honest count when it clearly was the duty of others to do so.

He admitted having made a mistake. He said that if he had to do it all over again, he would have told the Warren Commission the truth. At least, Helms had the candor to publicly purge himself.

However, the people who immediately climbed all over his back didn't have the decency to recognize the traditional doctrine of plausible deniability that has protected Presidents from taking undue heat on intelligence operations from Harry Truman through Richard Nixon.

They failed to take into account the fact that had Helms informed the Warren Commission about the get-rid-of-Castro schemes, Lyndon Johnson most likely would have had his scalp.

SINCE THE WATERGATE years, it is that plausible deniability doctrine that has gotten a host of American intelligence agents in trouble. They have been left hanging defenseless from a limb after thinking they were acting under the color of presidential authority in national security matters.

Actually, they were. But nobody ever had reduced to writing or statute the authority of Presidents to approve covert acts to defend national security.

Nor had anyone publicly admitted that for almost 30 years, Presidents had kept their own skirts clean by

practicing the doctrine of plausible deniability.

Which meant that nobody asked too many questions, including Congress, and intelligence chiefs operated under purposefully vague orders that gave them the greatest latitude and their bosses the greatest degree of protection from personal accountability if something went wrong.

In fact, Presidents swore their intelligence agency chiefs to an oath never to reveal secrets to unauthorized outsiders.

That was the atmosphere under which Helms functioned during the Cold War years when his critics now think he should have told the Warren Commission the whole truth, forgetting that the then attorney general himself was as fully qualified and more securely situated to tell the panel the same thing.

THE DOCTRINE of plausible deniability worked well until Watergate. Then Congress and the courts decided to change the rules of the intelligence game. They moved to apply the new American morality retroactively.

In doing so, they crucified a number of intelligence agents who had allegedly committed illegal acts in the belief their commander-in-chief had authorized them.

Now, for having admitted what he perceives today to have been a mistake, Helms' critics are ready to place him in a public pillory for something for which men in far more exalted positions should have accepted responsibility.

I suppose his latest sin is merely being available. He is alive. But the rest of the practitioners of the doctrine of plausible deniability either are dead or have dropped out of sight.

And Helms is left standing alone as a handy target for the retroactive wisdom of those who believe an international conspiracy took John F. Kennedy's life in Dallas nearly 15 years ago.

It must be grand to have hindsight.